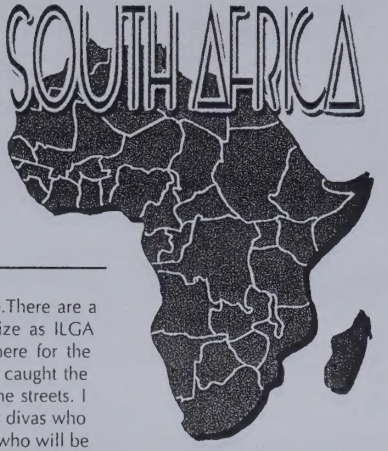
PRIDE AND PARADOX IN SOUTH AFRICA

Craig Washington
Co-Director of Southerns On New Ground (SONG)
404-249-8788 - email: song4cw@aol.com
Song will be presenting a LGBT People of Color Retreat Feb 25 & 26, 2000 in Birmingham, AL.



Between Atlanta and New York I have attended about 20 Gay Pride events. At the New York Stonewall 25th Anniversary celebration in '94, I was dealing with an HIV-illness that prompted several trips to public restrooms along the parade route. I was determined to be there in more ways than one. Pride events have always held a special meaning for me no matter who shows up alongside me and who does not. During the bus ride to the 10th Annual Pride in South Africa I wondered how different this event would be. We would not be marching through a predominantly white middle class enclave speckled with rainbow flags and bumper stickers nor some downtown historic gay village. This route would take us through the very black-skinned heart of Jo-burg (short for Johannesburg), capitol of South Africa. How would Joburg residents receive the array of LGBT expression, glitter and excess cavorting through their hood.

The kickoff site was an open market area flanked by scores of black and Indian vendors on one side and a small complex of cafes and shops on the other. The vendors seemed unfazed by the hundreds of choir members putting last touches on their faces, floats, motorbikes and heels. It looks like the commencement of just about every Pride I've been to with a few ironic exceptions. There were even less people of color here than I usually see among the startup crowd at the Civic Center MARTA station. Scanning across the waves of naked muscle, dykes on bikes and peacock feathered royalty, I notice an image so out of sync with my sensibilities that I squint several times to make sure of what I'm seeing. It is a white queen in an otherwise generic drag in black face with an afro wig. I look at her quite directly and she turns to avoid the glare of disdain. I am tempted to snatch the wig and anything else I could tear off her or at least tell her what an offensive ass she is, but I know too much about white supremacists at home to waste my time here. I turn away and let it go.

Women's visibility was a priority theme so the parade was led off by a lesbian biker contingent. I didn't see a sister among them. I remember the words of Beverly Palesa Ditsie, a Joburg-based black lesbian activist who detailed the erasure of black women from the LGBT movements here.There are a number of black folks among the throngs, some of whom I recognize as ILGA Conference attendants. I run into Amin, a Moroccan brother also here for the Conference. We hug and compare notes about the crowd, both of us caught the minstrel queen. The roar of the bike herd launches everybody onto the streets. I spot 2 new comrades from Zimbabwe, Biggie and Cuda, two animated divas who showed me a lot of the Joburg night life. They stage a mock fight over who will be the next Mrs. Washington. Amin and I are cracking up. They tell us in no uncertain terms that they were not prepared to walk the entire route and wish us well.

As we advance through the streets of Yeoville I long for an aerial view. I imagine us as a river of revelers swelling with random drops and streams of latecomers who jump in before the parade passes by. I look at many brown faces of onlookers who witness the spectacle of us from their lobbies, storefronts, windows and sidewalks. Many of them are cheering us on while a few appear bewildered but not too bothered.

I am surprised at the lack of hostility but then I have spent 7 years of my gay life in a metropolitan hub of the Bible belt. Atlanta Pride usually has a few anti-gay hecklers or benevolent faced Christians who smile when they say "Jesus loves you but you're going to hell." The first time I walked with the multi-racial LGBT contingent of the MLK March down Auburn Avenue, I expected more hostility there. Au contraire, our folk seemed okay with us. It is sometimes difficult to refute the pervasive myth that our people carry genetic homophobia and remember that we have allies within our black communities

A few of the paraders greet onlookers with the high-pitched calls I have never heard come from a white person before. The black Africans respond in kind to their white gay fellow citizens. I am clearly not at home and feel at once in touch with my blackness, my gayness, my Americanness and my ignorance. Within this darkroom moment, the image develops before me, the contrast between participant and spectator. Most of the former are white and almost all of the latter are black. Then I recall an earlier conversation with Peter Mohlahledi of GLOW (Gays and Lesbians of Witwatersrand - South Africa's oldest black LGBT organization) who told me that GLOW organized the first 3 Pride events which involved mostly black people and was designed as a protest against all kinds of injustices in South Africa. Several folks in the crowd covered their faces with paper bags fearing the risk of public acknowledgement. Eventually, elitist white male groups took over the event. It has been criticized by many lesbian and gay organizers for its disconnect from grassroots activism and its exclusion and subordination of black lesbians.

I share my observations with Amin about the receptiveness of the residents. He ponders whether they would be as accepting if most of the participants were black. It is a question neither of us can answer. I notice to my right one of the ILGA organizers, a white man whom I greet. He is holding one end of an ILGA banner and he responds by saying, "Here, you people are always talking about inclusion. Why don't you help hold the banner?" He smiles as he says this to me. I quickly inform him that if he was serious about his organization being inclusive he wouldn't turn to any black person at arm's length and ask him to join him by telling him what he can do. I am all too familiar with this approach from white organizations who set the agenda and the table then ask us to sit and participate. Anyway, I tell him what he can do with his banner and resume my conversation with Amin.

As we reach a particular stopping point, a banner bearing the name Simon Nkoli unfurls from a terrace just above us. Nkoli was one of South Africa's most beloved men, an openly gay organizer (he founded the afore-mentioned GLOW) who was a lifetime member of the African National Congress. He was a freedom fighter who had his activist comrades address homophobia and led fellow LGBT workers to take on all kinds of anti-oppression work. Nkoli was also an AIDS activist. He died of AIDS related disease on the eve of World AIDS Day 1998. We pause for seconds that in memory seems so much longer. The sight of his name elicits an up swell of shrieks and applause and tears. In an afternoon filled with color, paradox and disappointment, this is the most prideful part of the day, the piece I will break off and savor for the rest of my life. *(END)*

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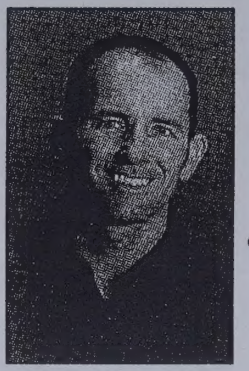

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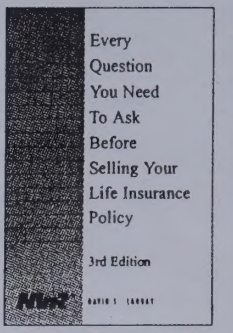

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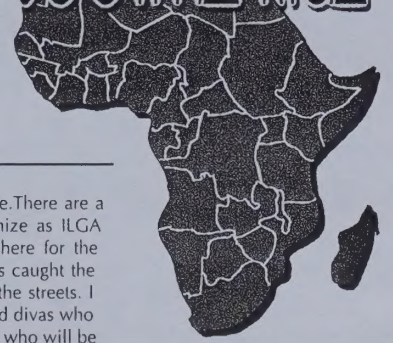

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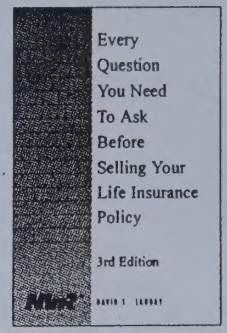

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